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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews cultural experiences that create home-school discrepancies in Puerto Rican adolescents, some of whom have remigrated from the mainland to the island, and considers factors leading to a diagnosis of social maladjustment or emotional disturbance. The effects of cultural experience, the parents' expectations, and the family's economic situation are examined. Cultural discrepancies experienced by Puerto Rican pupils participating in "More Alternatives for Students," an alternative program in Hartford, Connecticut, included discrepancies in time, space, dependency, personalism, humanism, and relationalism between both cultures. The author concludes that special education teachers must realize that their educational methods are derived from their own culture and must gain a more thorough understanding of the island's educational methods and culture. (CL)

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HOME-SCHOOL DISCREPANCIES AND THE PUERTO RICAN EXCEPTIONAL CHILD[1]

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HOME-SCHOOL DISCREPANCIES AND THE
PUERTO RICAN EXCEPTIONAL PUPIL

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to discuss cultural experiences that create home-school discrepancies on Puerto Rican adolescents, which might influence their diagnosis as socially mal-adjusted or emotionally disturbed. The paper discusses discrepancies of time, space, dependency, personalism, humanism, and relationalism between both cultures. It concludes that Special Education teachers working with this population must understand the influence of home culture on the educational process of the Puerto Rican exceptional pupil.

HOME-SCHOOL DISCREPANCIES AND THE PUERTO RICAN EXCEPTIONAL PUPIL

Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the cultural experiences that create home-school discrepancies on Puerto Rican adolescents, which have influenced their diagnosis as socially maladjusted or emotionally disturbed. These experiences took place both in Puerto Rico and in Hartford, Connecticut over a period of twelve years.

For the purpose of this paper socially maladjusted pupils are defined as those who have shown a pattern of social interaction which is characterized by conflicts which cannot be resolved adequately without the assistance of authority figures. An emotionally disturbed pupil is defined as that student that exhibits a pattern of functioning which is so inappropriate that it calls attention to pupils and severely limits the individual from profiting from the regular bilingual classroom learning experiences.

The Problem

The average re-migration of Puerto Ricans from the mainland to the island has averaged 40,000 per year. On returning to the island many have tried to further their education, only to realize that their lack of communication skill, both in Spanish and English, hinders their efforts (San Juan Star, 1980). The Department of Instruction of Puerto Rico points out that there are approximately 80,000 re-migrates in the public school system of the island. Only 10% of this popula-

tion is receiving services in Bilingual Education classroom (Department of Public Instruction, 1980).

The Office of Education has estimated that there are approximately four (4) million limited English proficiency (LEP) pupils in the United States. The Puerto Rican population on the mainland has been estimated to be 1.8 million (Ahearn, 1979). Most of this population is located in the northeastern United States.

The constant migration/re-migration process from the island to the mainland and back to the island has created a generation of pupils with the same cultural roots but with different cultural patterns. The pupils faced sociological, psychological, and linguistic adaptation problems (San Juan Star, 1980). Most re-migrates need help in both language arts and social adaptation skills. The majority of the parents lack the skills needed to help their children and most schools do not have adequate programs to help them.

The Migratory Process and Its Effect on the Adjustment of the Pupil

There are factors which must be considered in dealing with recent Puerto Rican migrant pupils. These factors include: (1) the cultural experience, including norms and values in the mainland (the extent to which the pupil has undergone socialization); (2) the parents' expectations (hopes and fears), as far as they influence the pupil; (3) the economical situation in which the parents find themselves as they are projected to the pupil.

Some of the students that were referred to us reflected temporary symptoms of psychological disturbance which disappeared after the first six months on the mainland. These symptoms were as follows:

(1) Homesickness (bereavement process) -- The symptoms manifest themselves after leaving or losing something or someone loved: parents, a partner, a region, a house and so on. The feeling of not belonging any more, too, arouses an intense longing.

(2) The migrant Puerto Rican pupil has to undergo the process of bereavement twice or even more often in some cases: when he/she sets off for the mainland, and on leaving the families' surroundings (including relatives and friends staying behind), and when the family decides to return to the island. Both occasions are characterized not only by a feeling of loss but also by a transformation in the roles of the members of the family.

(3) Homesickness can have both mental and physical effects which are closely interrelated. Eppink (1979) indicates that separation due to migration can have malfunctioning of the central nervous system and changes in the autonomic nervous system. The influence of stress on the hormone system can result in feelings of unrest, agitation and tension coupled with panic and irritability. The symptoms are restlessness, loss of appetite, loss of weight, sleep disorders, digestive complaint, headaches, palpitations and muscle cramps. Malfunction of

the organs of the body can cause superfluous perspiration, diarrhea, and nausea, especially before and during emotional events, from which psychosomatic diseases can result. In a three-year period 100% of all entrants into our program (1,800 approximately) reported one or more of the symptoms mentioned above.

(4) Occult bilingualism -- Some migrant Puerto Rican youngsters were placed in the program because of the effect of bilingualism as a factor which might contribute to language handicaps in exceptional pupils. These pupils were migrating to the mainland for a second or third time. These pupils may speak English well enough to be understood. In fact, teachers may not even be aware that Spanish, the native language, may be spoken in the home. In this sense, the bilingualism may be "occult" (McCormick, 1980). Even though such pupils speak English without a noticeable accent, these youngsters may have specific difficulties with English usage and grammar, have a smaller receptive and expressive vocabulary, use shorter sentences, make articulation errors, misuse idiomatic expressions and have decreased reading skills (Arsenian, 1945; Carrow, 1957).

MAS (More Alternatives for Students) as an Alternative for Limited English Proficiency Pupils

MAS was an alternative school within a school program in Hartford, Connecticut. The program was located in three schools serving pupils in grades K-12. The structure of the

program contained three components: a bilingual instructional unit, a reading and mathematics laboratory, and an emotional adjustment and counseling component. The Project population was comprised of approximately 985 recent Puerto Rican migrant/re-migrant pupils who had been diagnosed as socially maladjusted or emotionally disturbed. The staff was surprised that approximately 65% of the pupils that had been diagnosed and placed on the program were able to return to the mainstream after participating in the project anywhere from six (6) months to one (1) school year. Project MAS provided a laboratory to study the exhibited behaviors of pupils learning in a dual cultural context.

Learning in a Dual Cultural Context

Dickerman (1973) suggests that the function of the schools are: (1) to provide pupils with a common culture model to which they are expected to conform; (2) to convince the pupils that their own socio-cultural heritage did not count; (3) to predict their future status in society. Leacock (1969), believes that teachers because of their affiliation with the majority culture have a tendency to reject the non-conforming heritage and lifestyle of the migrant youngster and expect minimal academic achievement.

Feshback (1974) reports that the most popular learners were those possessing the qualities of conformity, orderliness and rigidity; the least popular learners were depicted as independent, active and assertive. Ross (1974) has shown

in her study on teachers' perceptions of young Puerto Rican children, that this perception is influenced by the perceiver's own cultural conditioning and the expectations of their sociocultural group.

Condon et al. (1979) suggest that in order to understand the nature of the cross-cultural problem, one must first become acquainted with the cultural milieu of the pupils and accept the existence of a dual cultural barrier in all teacher-student interactions involving children of different backgrounds. In such a situation the background of each individual acts as a screen which distorts the meaning of exchanged messages. The conflicts resulting from these mutual cultural dissonances can only be resolved by one or both interacting individuals. Condon et al. (1979) suggest that in the classroom, the responsibility for overcoming the problem is clearly that of the teacher as the professionally trained adult in charge of the pupil's education.

In School/Home Cultural Behavior, the Puerto Rican Pupil, and the Resulting Conflict

Fitzpatrick (1971) points out that the conflicts experienced by the Puerto Rican migrant pupils are a result of their attempts to reconcile the divergent values of the home, school and peer culture often predispose them to suffer identity problems, academic difficulties, parental rejection, psychological disturbance, juvenile delinquency, and general anomie. Bucchioni (1965), suggests that the classroom on the mainland has become the scene of value conflicts for the Puerto

Rican pupils, and they have responded to those negative learning conditions with inattention, restlessness, impatience, and sometimes disorderliness. Condon et al. (1979) suggests that one of the major outcomes of this situation was that teachers spent more time on the enforcement of certain values and norms in class than they did on the development of academic skills.

Let's examine some of the cultural discrepancies encountered by the Puerto Rican pupils participating in Project MAS. We will, where possible, substantiate with current research each of the areas of discrepancy.

Discrepancies in Defining the Dimension of Time and Space

Teachers on the mainland are accustomed to think of time and space as strictly physical dimension which set certain limitations to all pupils' action. Both of these parameters acquire a psychological significance which is culturally determined and, therefore, subject to variations from one society to another (Condon et al., 1979).

Hall (1966) describes proxemic behavior or the conservation of distance as a serious point of interference between mainland and island culture.

The conflicts in proxemic behavior are also likely to occur in the academic context. The Anglo teacher on the mainland has reacted negatively without realizing it to the crowding behavior of the Puerto Rican pupil, and the teachers intuitive withdrawal has been interpreted by the pupil as a sign of exclusion from the inner circle of favorite pupils.

Occasionally, at a conference involving parents of Puerto Rican exceptional learners, a father's desperate reach for human contact to communicate his anguish to the LD Specialist (a woman) has only succeeded in creating a climate of discomfort and distrust between them because the gesture has seemed inappropriately familiar and offensive to her.

Condon et al. (1979) suggests that time is another dimension which may create confusion between interacting individuals of different backgrounds, for it is subject to arbitrary cultural handling in terms of meaning and even quantification. On the mainland time is perceived as a precious commodity to be conserved and budgeted carefully because of its irreplaceability. In the island, time is treated in a casual manner, accommodating its passage to the people's needs, rather than letting themselves be controlled by it.

A manifestation of conflicting time orientation concerns the issue of punctuality. For the teacher, school attendance takes precedence over all but the most serious family obligations and participation in the christening celebration of a distant cousin is not a permissible excuse for any student to miss a scheduled test. For the Puerto Rican parents the time lost in classroom learning by their teachers is not as important as that invested in family duties, and the teacher's objections are incomprehensible, for they reflect a lack of sensitivity to kinship's responsibilities. Faced with such alien pressures of the necessary time, oriented skills, the Puerto Rican pupil responds to the situation with a set of

behaviors which carry the seeds of self-defeat, stress, anxiety, fatigue and the fear of not being able to meet the demands placed upon them. As these conditions worsen, the pupil becomes identified as a problem learner, a first step towards potential selection as a candidate for Special Education.

Cultural Characteristics in the Upbringing that Create Home-School Discrepancies

The four characteristics which are most frequently emphasized in the upbringing of a Puerto Rican youngster are: dependency, personalism, humanism and relationalism.

Dependency: Puerto Rican families believe in sheltering their children from life's problems as long as they are able to do so. For this reason, the first encounter which the pupil has with discipline and learning experiences of the academic environment occurs in the school. The pupils are often shy and inhibited. The shyness and retiring behavior are often perceived by the mainland teacher as a sign of immaturity likely to hinder the pupils' social adjustment and educational progress. The pupil unable to respond in an appropriate manner to the teacher's demands for habits of independence in the classroom, often rebel or withdraw from an intolerable situation. In so doing, the pupil inevitably displays behavioral patterns which may be confused with symptoms of exceptionalities. In the eyes of the school staff, either behavior is irrational and creates instructional or disciplinary problems which may point to the potential presence of symptoms of exceptionality.

Personalism: In the Puerto Rican culture personalism involves self-concept and the maintenance of a positive image toward the public. Puerto Rican mothers will go to extensive lengths to insure that their children make a good impression upon others. Under these conditions any instructional occurrence which conveys a negative message of failure to the Puerto Rican pupil is an affront to the pupil's self-respect and an attack upon the pupil's family pride which the pupil does not know how to handle. Public denigration is all the more serious to the pupil in that it strips the children of their self-confidence and exposes them to disgrace in full sight of their peers. Shame is a powerful instrument of discipline in the Puerto Rican culture.

The fear of public disgrace is an important factor to be considered in the identification of exceptionality among Puerto Rican pupils. It is one of the reasons why many parents are reluctant to accept placement in Special Education classes. The parents' reluctance might be justified and vindicated by the inability of the school to distinguish between two sets of scholastic problems: those created by linguistic inadequacies and cultural interferences on the one hand, and those caused by actual intellectual limitations and personal maladjustments on the other hand.

Humanism: On the mainland a pupil who demonstrates what is viewed as an inordinate craving for attention is often diagnosed as one deprived of love and care at home, or one afflicted by feelings of insecurity. The teachers who are the object of

this relentless pursuit for affection may experience such an acute discomfort at the public display of emotion that they are driven to discourage the pupil's attention by avoiding the pupil's touch, or even close proximity. What most teachers on the mainland fail to realize is that demonstrative behavior on the part of the Puerto Rican is a perfectly normal way of conveying good will and human feelings towards one's fellow men; it is also a form of communication between interacting individuals.

In the Puerto Rican culture the qualities of generosity and sharing are related to an individual's normal spiritual and personal development. On the mainland, material acquisitions are a manifestation of one's success in life, any extreme form of sharing and generosity tends to be suspect and very often be misinterpreted as a form of bribery. The realization that other people are not as ready as they are to part willingly with what they have, comes as a disturbing surprise to them, and it takes them a long time to learn that concepts of sharing and generosity have different values and meanings with different people.

Relationalism: The shyness and introversion, or rebellion and antagonism so often associated with the Puerto Rican pupils in school are not as a rule characteristic of their behavior in their home environment. They tend to prevail only in hostile surroundings and one contrary to the rules of conduct which govern home and community life.

The pupil tends to be obedient and submissive toward their teachers and friendly toward their fellow students. Accustomed to a somewhat leisurely, indirect, and subjective style of communications which allows the interlocutors ample time to express their thoughts and feelings, the Puerto Rican pupils find themselves immersed in a series of hurriedly paced activities where a delay in answering the teacher's questions is lost opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. As time goes by the pupils become increasingly unwilling to expose themselves to these curtailed conversational interactions which, among the members of the pupil's group, are interpreted as discourteous and downright insulting. Under the circumstances, the pupils are left with two behavioral options, either of which will enable the pupils to protect their self-identity; one is to fight openly for survival, and the other is to avoid further destructive classroom interaction. In the teacher's eyes, the shift in behavior from reluctant class participation to aggressive response or total withdrawal represents simply a new stage in emerging symptoms of mental or emotional disturbances, all of which identify the pupil as a clearcut case for referral.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) Without help the Puerto Rican migrant pupil cannot develop properly first in the island's educational system, then in the educational system of the mainland, because the pupil has no "test situations" available.

(2) It is not possible to transfer the educational system from the island to the mainland and vice versa.

(3) The interdependence of educational standards, values and methods on the one hand and the social framework on the other is so very complex that many questions relating to the Puerto Rican exceptional pupil will always remain unanswered and unsolved.

(4) Special Education teachers on the mainland must:

(a) realize that their educational methods are derived from their own culture.

(b) gain a more thorough understanding of the educational methods in the culture of the island, and of the significance of the pupil's family ties.

(c) be aware of the advantages and drawbacks of the additional help given the pupil.

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